





THOUGHTS
FOR
THE SICK-ROOM

BY
REV. W. A. MACKAY, B.A., D.D.,
WOODSTOCK, ONT.

"Out of crosses crowns are made."—Cuyler.

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death-

led by

of

it may

In vain deeply hushed and mute

Oh, I (your only smile)

Only I am

Can these wondrous feet be mine

All my life were laid upon thee

All my griefs were on thee laid

For the blood of thine atonement

All my sinners debt has paid

Dearest Saviour

I believe for thee have died

Dearest Saviour, go not from me

Let thy presence still abide

Look in tenderest love upon me

I am doubting as thy side

Dearest Saviour

When for my sinners died

Both now and are clasped around thee

And my heart is in thy breast

And my weak soul has found thee

Such a perfect refuge

Dearest Saviour

For I know that thou hast died

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HEBREWS XII. 1-12.

OFTEN has this passage been read at the bedside of the sick and the dying, and never hath it failed to yield comfort and instruction to the believing child of God. It is a fountain from which thousands have been refreshed, and yet it is as full, as free and as refreshing as ever. May He, whose name is as ointment poured forth, bless our consideration of it to sick and sorrowing saints. While I shall speak particularly to those visited with sickness, yet what I say will apply to all afflicted persons, whatever their trial may be.

Here let me utter a word of caution. The consolations of this passage are for believers, and for them only. The children alone have a right to covenant blessings. If, dear reader, you have not yet submitted to God, I shall have but little to say to you at this time. But I cannot part from you without a word of warning and exhortation. If your present sickness should be unto death, what a dark and melancholy prospect is before you! The old house is falling down about your ears, but you have none other provided. When death casts you to the door, where will you go for help? God is not your Father, Jesus is not your Saviour, and you have no balm for your wound. A fearful change will death be to you—a change from earth to hell, from light to darkness, from hope to eternal despair. The unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. vi. 9.) Awake! awake! Prepare to meet thy God. The Lord hath not yet forsaken you. By separating you from distracting occupations, absorbing pleas-

ures and giddy friends, and shutting you up in your room, and laying you upon this bed, He is seeking to constrain you to reflect on serious things. Despise not the chastening of the Lord, but hear His voice and accept His offered mercy in Christ. Then your sickness will be to your own eternal good and to the glory of God.

1. But now I turn to God's children. Let us learn from this passage that *affliction is from God*. Observe in verses 5 and 6 that it is the Lord who "chastens," who "rebukes" and who "scourgeth." This is the uniform testimony of Scripture. "The Lord killeth and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up. The Lord maketh poor and maketh rich: he bringeth low and lifteth up." (1 Sam. ii. 6, 7.) "Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled; thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust." (Ps. civ. 29.) "I wound and I heal." (Deut. xxxii. 39.) Job clearly understood this truth. "Affliction," says he (v. 6), "cometh not for thout of the dust, neither doth trouble spring out of the ground." See how he ascribes all his afflictions to the Lord (i. 21). Apparently it was the Sabeans that took away his oxen and asses; it was the Chaldeans that took away his camels; it was the wind from the wilderness, raised by the devil, that took away his children. But Job makes no mention of Sabeans, Chaldeans or devils; he looks to the great first cause of all events, and says, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Thus it is all through the Bible; however the trial comes upon us, it is to be ascribed to God as its Author.

"He sendeth sun, He sendeth shower
Alike; they're needful for the flower."

Second causes there usually are, but these are under the control of Him who sitteth upon the throne of the universe, and who maketh all things work toge-

ther for good to His children. Accident, chance, fate, destiny, have no place in the Christian's creed. In His agony our Lord said, "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" (John xviii. 11.) Wicked men and devils were the second causes, but He looks beyond these, and recognizes all His sufferings as coming from His Father. So should we. Our sickness is not a caldron, but a "cup;" it is not a cup sent by chance or ordained by fate, but a cup "given," and it is given not by an enemy, but by a "Father"—one who has a father's right to do what seemeth good in His sight, and a father's affection, and can do us no wrong.

Let us recognize this great truth of God's agency in all our trials. It gives significance to every experience of life. It assures us that every pang that shoots through the frame and makes the flesh quiver is a message from God; and every sorrow that shades the brow and dims the eye is a message from God. Let us not, then, murmur, but rather say, with the Psalmist, "I was dumb; I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it" (Ps. xxxix. 9); and with Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (xiii. 15). Our life is no unpiloted vessel, left to the mercy of the storm; no weed, left to the sport of the fitful waves. In the dark and cloudy day, how full of comfort the thought that a loving Father's hand deals the blow, though that blow would seem to crush the spirit. How sweet to be able to say in our sickness, "It is the Lord; he doeth all things well." What a lesson of trust we have here! Trust in the Lord at all times, under all circumstances. Trust Him in deep waters as well as on the shore. When the waves are raging, trust your God as well as when the sea is as glass. Be calm, fear nothing. Jesus knows our way; Jesus knows your way, every stone and every thorn in it. In our sick chamber He says to us, "Fear thou not, for I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God, I will strengthen thee;

yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness." At such a time we begin to sing, with a new meaning, the 46th Psalm:

"God is our refuge and our strength,
In straits a present aid;
Therefore, although the earth remove,
We will not be afraid."

Or we sing the sweet hymn:

"The Great Physician now is near,
The sympathizing Jesus,
He speaks the drooping heart to cheer,
Oh, hear the voice of Jesus."

2. This passage also teaches us that *the cause of all sickness is sin*. God did not make man to be the creature of suffering and affliction. The terms "chasteneth," "scourgeth," "rebuked," imply the guilt or sin of the persons so dealt with. "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Rom. v. 12.) "The wages of sin is death." (Rom. vi. 23.) Suffering is in our world, not by chance, or by fate, or by the demand of any uncontrolled law of nature, or even by any arbitrary appointment of God. There is a righteous necessity for it. The dross requires the furnace. Sin makes suffering necessary. In heaven there is no suffering, for there is no sin. Sin is the one bitter root from which spring all the misery and sorrow in the world to-day. Pain, disease and death; strifes, quarrels and divorces; wars, battles and fightings; envy, jealousy and malice; deceit, fraud and cheating; violence, oppression and robbery; selfishness, unkindness and ingratitude—all these are the fruits of sin.

What a view this gives us of how a holy and gracious God hates sin! When, on the one hand, we reflect on the infinite love of God, and His delight in the happiness of His creatures; and consider, on the other hand, how that, notwithstanding this love, God permits, nay,

appoints, so much suffering to befall us, oh! are we not sensible that sin, which is the cause of all this suffering, must be, in His estimation, a most offensive and loathsome thing! It grieves His heart as nothing else can. When a warm-hearted and benignant father, who finds his chief delight in the bosom of his family, lifts the rod and smites the child of his affections, the very warmth of his love, when viewed in connection with the severity of his chastisements, shows his abhorrence of the disobedience which imposes upon him the necessity of doing violence to his own feelings by inflicting pain upon the object of his fondest regard. How, then, must a God of love hate sin, which makes it necessary for Him to afflict so severely those whom He loves so well!

But the child of God, visited with sickness, should not rest satisfied with this general view of the cause of all suffering; he should inquire into the special reasons that may exist in his past life or in the present state of his soul, for God's dispensation towards him. He may rest assured that, if God did not see an absolute necessity for the chastisement, it would not have been sent.

"This weed? This stone? It is thy heart:
It must be crushed by pain and smart,
It must be cleansed by sorrow's art,
Ere it will yield a fragrance sweet,
Ere it will shine a jewel meet
To lay before thy dear Lord's feet."

"Show me," says Job, "wherefore thou contendest with me." This should be our prayer in similar circumstances. We should examine ourselves, and endeavor to ascertain what root of bitterness there is still in our heart, or what cause of offence in our life, which has called forth God's providential warning and chastisement.

I am aware, indeed, that while all suffering proceeds from one general cause, viz., sin, yet it does by no means follow that the special afflictions, with which any of

God's people may be visited, can in all cases be ascribed to any special sin. We are not warranted to regard those who are visited with the severest and most protracted suffering as being on that account marked out as the greatest sinners. No; afflictions are not dealt out in this state of probation on the principles of strict retribution. God often sends afflictions upon His people as a trial of their faith, patience, humility; as a means of preparing them for future duty, of fitting them for more extended usefulness, and of promoting in general their progress in sanctification. Still affliction, even when viewed in this light, as a preparatory discipline of the soul, implies and presupposes certain defects in our character which ought to be supplied, certain remaining corruptions which should be subdued; and in most cases the Christian will be at no loss to discover, in his own state and character, sufficient reason for God's dispensation towards him. He ought, therefore, in his affliction, to humble himself before God, and endeavor with all care to ascertain what are the defects of his character and what the special reason of his present affliction, so that, knowing the plague of his own heart, he may apply himself vigorously and in right earnest to the work of his high calling. The Jonah in the ship, that hath raised the storm, must be thrown overboard without delay; the Achan in the camp, that has brought the trouble upon us, must be utterly destroyed. Let the child of God, visited with sickness, consider whether he has not been gradually and almost insensibly falling from his first love, whether he has not become less spiritual in the ordinary frame of his thoughts and affections; whether he has not become, more than he once was, a stranger at the throne of grace, or more cold and formal in the exercise of prayer; whether he has not been neglecting some duty or addicted to some self-indulgence, or in some way or other exhibiting the marks of a decaying piety, or walking, as a backslider, from the Lord.

And if, on making such an inquiry, he finds cause to conclude that it is not now with him as it was in the months past, when the candle of the Lord shone upon him, oh, let him thank God for this needful discipline! let him be deeply humbled in his soul because he has thus provoked the Lord to anger, and let his earnest prayer be not so much that his sickness may be removed as that the cause of it may be taken away.

3. We learn further from this passage that to the true Christian *sickness is not a mark of God's anger, but of His love.* Verse 6 tells us that "whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth." This is a quotation from Prov. iii. 12, and the meaning is that it is a universal law that God sends affliction of some kind on those whom He truly loves. God had one Son without sin, but not one son without suffering. All God's children need correction, and they all receive it. All the vessels of mercy need scouring, and they all get it. Of the wicked it is said (Ps. lxxiii. 5), "They are not in trouble as other men, neither are they plagued like other men. Their eyes stand out with fatness; they have more than heart could wish. Behold, these are the ungodly who prosper in the world; they increase in riches." The Lord in mercy saves His people from such a lot. They are emptied from vessel to vessel, tried by one affliction after another, deprived of the dearest earthly friends, and stript of every earthly possession, lest they should come into the condemnation of the world. There are many instances like the following: A worthy man, whom God had prospered in his outward estate, and who lived in ease and plenty on his farm, suffered the world so much to possess his affections that he became for the time spiritually cold and indifferent. The church of God was attended only irregularly, closet prayer was entirely given up, and family prayer was only occasional and heartless. The man was on the down grade, but the Lord had mercy upon him. First his wife was removed by death, but he still remained worldly-

mind. Then a beloved son, and for a time he was favorably impressed; but only for a time. Then his crops failed and his cattle died; still his grasp on the world was not unloosed. Then God touched his person, and brought on him a lingering, fatal disease; the world, however, occupied still too much of his thoughts. His house finally took fire, and as he was carried out of the burning building he exclaimed, "Blessed be God, I am cured at last!" He died happily shortly afterwards.

Just because the Lord loves us He does not leave us to ourselves, but He hedges up our way with thorns, so that we may not wholly wander from Him. To restrain and govern a child, to correct him when he errs, shows that there is a parental solicitude for him, and that he is not disowned or treated as an outcast. Thus the apostle reasons in verses 7 and 8 (revised version), "It is for chastening that ye endure; God dealeth with you as with sons: for what son is there whom his father chasteneth not? But if ye are without chastening, whereof all have been made partakers, then are ye bastards and not sons." Sickness is not punishment in order to uphold law, but chastisement to reclaim the offender.

"Trials," says McCheyne, "are God's love-tokens." It is not always that the afflicted believer sees this. Sometimes the trial is so severe, and the spiritual vision so beclouded, that he exclaims, "The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me." (Isa. xlix. 14.) "What!" saith he, "doth God love me while He is thus making His arrows to pierce me through and through, causing the sun of my earthly joys to set in clouds?" Yes, O afflicted! tossed with tempest, He chastens thee because He loves thee. This trial comes from His own tender, loving hand—His own tender, loving heart.

Art thou laid on a sick-bed? Are sorrowful days and wearisome nights appointed unto thee? Let this

be the pillow on which to rest thine aching head—it is because He loves me.

Does bereavement wring thy heart and desolate thy home? He opens the tomb because He loves thee. As it is the suffering child of the family that claims a mother's deepest affections and most tender solicitude, so thou, afflicted believer, hast in thy affliction, embarked on thy side, the tenderest love and solicitude of a chastening Father. He loved thee into this sickness; He will love thee through it. Love is the reason of it all. There is not one drop of wrath in the cup which thou art called upon to drink. "As many as I love," saith the ascended Lord, "I rebuke and chasten."

Afflicted one, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, but hear His rod, and listen to what He has to say to you in it. Be this thy resolve, "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold." Pray that the fire may burn out your dross, and that through this trial you may become a holy golden vessel for the Master's use in time and in eternity.

4. Let us learn, also, *the design or end of affliction*, or the uses which it is intended to serve. As affliction proceeds neither from blind necessity nor from casual accident, but from a wise and loving God, nothing can be more certain than that it is designed for some great and useful purpose. Now, the design of affliction is expressly revealed to us in the passage before us. God here condescends to explain the reasons of His dealings with us. He tells us (verse 10) that He chastens not for His pleasure, but for our profit. And then this profit is more fully explained in the following clause: "That we might be partakers of his holiness." And in verse 11, we are told that chastening, although in itself not joyous, but grievous, yet produces "the peaceable fruits of righteousness in those who are exercised thereby."

From this we learn that the general end of affliction is the moral and spiritual improvement of believers; in

other words, their progressive sanctification and their preparation for glory. During Dr. Payson's last illness, a friend said to him, "I am sorry to see you lying upon your back." "Do you know why God puts us on our backs?" asked the smiling sufferer. "No," was the answer. "In order that we may look upward." There are many things during sickness that are well calculated to soften the feelings and elevate the soul: the separation from the busy world and its hardening influences, the stillness of the room, the mild light through the window-curtains, the low voices, and then, more than all, the kind words of those who surround us, their attention, their solicitude, perhaps the tears in their eyes—all this should cause us to "look upward."

The mode in which men prepare diamonds will, I think, illustrate the way in which God prepares His people, who are His jewels. Diamonds, you know, are dug out of the earth in a rough state, with no apparent beauty, covered with a hard, ugly crust; and they are cut, sawn, split and put upon the wheel, and ground, and ground, and ground, until they have the right form, until all the blemishes are ground out, and they shine in beauty fit for a king's crown. Now, Christians are God's diamonds, but in the state of nature they are very rough diamonds, and therefore they have to be kept long upon the wheel till every speck and blemish is worn off, and they are fit to shine as jewels in Immanuel's crown. Or to change the figure to one suggested by verse 11, and more familiar to Canadians, there are characters that are like summer fruits which ripen early in the season, under the warmth of the sun; but there are few such, except those whom God plucks and gathers, like early summer fruit, in the days of infancy, childhood and youth. There are other fruits that ripen not till the sharp autumn frosts come. All through the summer they are sour, bitter and unfit for food. The keen frosts make them luscious and mellow. There are many of Christ's disciples who resemble this

fruit. They are very unripe Christians; they are sharp, acrid men. They are severe, selfish, harsh, bitter, censorious. There is no sweetness, gentleness, kindness in them. They may be at the heart good men or women, but they are not beautiful. People cannot love them. And yet they are God's dear children. Then the frosts come—sharp, biting frosts. Sickness prostrates them, sorrow breaks in upon them. Bereavements turn the green leaves to sere and yellow. Humiliations come; trials come; disappointments come. They are defeated and crushed. God allows them to suffer great temptations. And out of these sad and painful experiences, these troubles and trials, these humiliations and failures, they come, like the autumn fruits after the frosts, mellow, luscious, rich and ripe.

Nothing like trials, afflictions, humiliations, defeats, to rid us of self-confidence, self-dependence and self of every form, and to make us humble, and meek, and kind, and gentle, and loving, and Christ-like.

Such is the design of affliction. Without these painful processes, many a man would never reach glory. It was the humiliations, defeats and trials of his early discipleship that made the Peter of the Gospels, the Peter of the Acts and Epistles. It was scourging, imprisonment and persecutions that made Paul the brightest jewel of the world.

“David's Psalms had ne'er been sung
If grief his heart had never wrung.”

Bereavements, loss and sore sickness fitted Job to write that wondrous book that bears his name. Rutherford's charming letters, headed “Christ's Palace, Aberdeen,” were written while he was imprisoned for conscience' sake. Bunyan got the “Pilgrim's Progress” out of prison walls and from the clanking of prison chains. And the hosts of the redeemed around the throne are described as “they who have come through great tribu-

lation." Child of God, faint not neither be discouraged if you are visited with sickness, or are under affliction of any kind. Let your Heavenly Father burn out your dross, mellow your fruits by sharp frosts, and grind off the roughness of your character on the wheel of affliction. Some day, when you get through, and shine in the glory of heaven, loudest amidst your praisings will be thanksgivings for your trials.

Let it be ours to ask, each of himself, "Is my trial sanctified to me? Is it bringing me nearer to Christ? Is it making me holier, purer, better, more meek, more gentle, more heavenly-minded?" Oh, remember that affliction of itself can do us no good, but the reverse; it may do us much harm. It does us good only as the Spirit works through it upon our hearts, but, apart from the Spirit, affliction invariably hardens. The same fire that melts the gold hardens the clay. So with affliction. It produces the very opposite effects on different persons, just as it is or is not sanctified to them, or, as our text puts it, just as they are or are not properly "exercised thereby." The affliction which softened the heart of David hardened into more obdurate impenitency the spirit of Pharaoh. You may spend a suffering life here, and then go to a suffering eternity hereafter.

5. And now we come to inquire how we ought to endure affliction. Verse 1 tells us that it is "with patience;" that is, with a quiet, calm submission to the will of our Heavenly Father. Patience under severe trials is, I think, one of the most beautiful graces. It is a grace which the angels cannot manifest. It is a flower of earth; it blooms not in Paradise; it requires trials for its development, and is nurtured only amid wind, and hail, and storm. Sick saint, your Heavenly Father is thus conferring upon you an infinite honor by calling you to glorify Him in a way the loftiest angelic natures cannot do. Forget not your opportunity. Let your chamber be a sanctuary, and

your bed a pulpit, from which will constantly issue a sermon testifying to the sustaining, comforting power of divine grace. A godly woman, who was a widow and the mother of a family of little children, was asked in her sickness whether she was more desirous to live or die. She replied, "I have no choice in the matter, but refer myself to the will of God." "But," said the other, "suppose God should refer it to you, whether to live or die, which would you choose?" "If God," replied she, "should refer it to me, I would even refer it back again to Him." Here was true Christian patience, and such holy resignation made the bed of death happy and joyous. The 23rd Psalm was read to her. At the close of it she said, "Ah, that's an easy seat." "What do you mean by an easy seat?" was asked. "I mean," was the response, "that though I am dying poor and helpless, and my little children will be left without either father or mother in a very short time, yet I know that the Lord will provide for them, and that lets me sit easy."

It is only the child of God can thus testify. Anyone can be happy when his cup is full of delights; the believer alone has songs when waters of a bitter cup are wrung out to him. Any sparrow can chirp in the daylight; it is only the nightingale that can sing in the dark.

But how can we acquire patience? It is by "looking unto Jesus" (verse 2), or "considering him" (verse 3). Just as you first looked to Jesus for salvation, so now you must continue looking to Him for patience and every needed grace. That is the way of salvation. Jesus first, Jesus last, Jesus midst, Jesus all in all. We are to consider Him as the suffering Saviour, "enduring the cross and despising the shame" (verse 2). Consider His suffering, and how patiently He endured it all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb so He

opened not His mouth. Did our blessed Saviour patiently endure such agonies, and shall we murmur at those trials which are the result of our sins and which are sent in love, and designed for our eternal good?

Christ's sufferings made Him the tender, compassionate Saviour that He is. He was made perfect through suffering. "In all our afflictions he is afflicted." "Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses." No mother enters more closely into sympathy with her suffering child than Jesus with His afflicted saints.

"When our heads are bowed with woe,
When our bitter tears o'erflow,
When we mourn the lost, the dear,
Then the Son of Man is near.

"Thou our throbbing flesh hast worn,
Thou our mortal griefs hast borne;
Thou hast shed the human tear,
Son of Man, to mourners dear."

Oh! it is grand to realize Christ thus one with us in trial. It is the sweetest feeling, I think, outside heaven. It is said that in the centre of a cyclone there is a little spot where there is perfect calm; so, in the very centre of your pain, and your grief, and your depression, there is a place of perfect repose when you know that you have so tender a sympathizer who has felt the same.

Look ever to Jesus. You need Him every day of your life, more especially in sickness, and most of all at a dying hour.

Then, again, this passage teaches us to endure our trials by looking beyond our trials to the rewards of eternity—"the joy set before" us (verse 2). "Our light affliction," says the apostle elsewhere, "which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." Yes, only a moment, and sorrow and sighing shall forever flee away. The last trial will be over, the last tear will be shed, the last

headache and the last heartache will be felt, and from the sunlit shores of glory, we will look back and see how all our earthly trials were as nothing compared with that exceeding weight of glory of which we cannot now conceive. Just as much as moments are exceeded by eternity, and the sighing of a man by the joy of an angel, and a few groans by the infinite and eternal hallelujahs, so are the sorrows of God's people insignificant compared with what is laid up for them in the treasure-house of eternity. Their sorrows will die, but so will not their joys. Every day of sorrow means a thousand years of joy multiplied with a never-ceasing numeration. Days without nights, holiness without sin, health without sickness, joys without sorrows, life without death. We shall dwell in a blessed country where an enemy never enters, and whence a friend never goes away.

" We sing of the realms of the blest,
That country so bright and so fair,
And oft are its glories confessed,
But what will it be to be there ?

" We speak of its freedom from sin,
From sorrow, temptation and care,
From trials without and within,
But what must it be to be there ?

" We speak of its service of love,
The robes which the glorified wear,
The Church of the first-born above,
But what must it be to be there ? "

During the singing of this hymn, a venerable man of God sat down and wept. When afterwards asked the reason, he answered, " I could not stand it—to think of the joy that's coming, to think that all my heart-breaks are but blasts to blow me the sooner to that shining shore." And if heaven is so bright, so glorious, so blessed, why should we not endure with patience the trials of a rough but hasty voyage home ?

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